

Acts 2:1-11

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.'

1 Corinthians 12:4-13

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

“Getting it Together”

Rev. Charles Schuster

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I began thinking about this sermon when I was in Fort Worth, Texas, with 900 other Methodists, knowing that it's Pentecost Sunday, after all, and it's Mothers' Day. Pentecost is the birth of the church, Mothers' Day is what it is, and it's isn't always the case that you get Mothers' Day on Pentecost. It was kind of a Pentecost in Fort Worth, in a way. 992 Methodists, speaking different languages. Some spoke Swahili, some spoke Portuguese, some spoke Russian, some spoke Mandarin Chinese, some spoke Spanish, some spoke French, some spoke Conservative Fundamentalist and spoke Liberal Relativist. Each of us spoke in our own language, and sometimes, we understood each other, like the disciples. Like the disciples. My goodness, what a disappointing group the were. Jesus couldn't have picked a worse bunch of people to be followers of his, when

you think about it. They argued with each other, they fell asleep in the garden when he needed them to stay awake. For crying out loud, they ran away when things got tough, and most of the time they really didn't understand what he was saying, even when he repeated it twice and tried to explain it to them. And one of them betrayed him. Pentecost. The disciples. Kind of like General Conference. On Pentecost, they all came together. In Texas, we all met in the same room and we tried to get it together. It's hard to get it together. It's hard to get it together for the church, it's hard for us to get it together.

A little girl wrote an essay about the difference between boys and girls, trying to get it together. It's an old essay, I expect you've heard it before. I certainly have told it before, maybe not here. She wrote, "People are composed of girls and boys, men and women. Girls are nice. Boys are no good until they grow up and get married. My mother is a woman, which is a grown-up girl with children. My father is so nice, I think he must have been a girl when he was a boy." James Moore found answers children had written on tests at school, trying to get it together. In answer to the question, "When was the nation founded?" one little boy wrote, "I didn't know it was losted." Another answer on a test reported that Socrates died of an overdose of wedlock. Well, that can't kill you. A little girl wrote, "The death of Thomas Jefferson was a big turning point in his life." Kids trying to get it together.

We met in Fort Worth to re-write the rules of the church at General Conference. We were reminded, all of us, of something John Wesley had said, and it helped us in a lot of ways. It helped us, and I'm going to share these thoughts with you today. It's called the three simple rules to help us get it together. They hoped that would help us in the United Methodist Church get it together. Three simple rules, it takes a lifetime. Three simple rules, simple but difficult. It takes a lifetime, I think, to live them, so let's give ourselves some slack here. It takes a lifetime to learn to live them, but what else is a lifetime for, but to spend it trying to get it together?

Rule number one: Do no harm. Do no harm. The Bible is a chronicle of people doing harm to each other, from Cain, who killed his brother Abel, asking, "What, am I my brother's keeper?" Jacob, who received his father's blessing by cheating Esau, by disguising himself as his brother when the blessing was given. Joseph's brothers killing a goat and putting the blood of the goat on the coat of many colors, and telling their father Joseph was dead. Sarah, who tried to kill Ishmail, son of her husband's concubine, because she was jealous of her rival. People of Nazareth, who didn't like Jesus' first sermon. After he preached it, they took him to the edge of the hill, they were going to throw him over a cliff. First, do no harm. At the hotel where we stayed, they had an interesting "Do Not Disturb" sign, you could hang it on the door if you wanted to be left alone and without interruption. It was so creative, I brought it home. It didn't say "Do Not Disturb." What is said was, "There's a good reason for you not knocking on the door right now."

When do we learn, and where do we learn, to do no harm? For some of us, we learned it at school. Our friends teach us. We read it in books, maybe the Bible. It's not really a message most of us get from cartoons on television or movies, although maybe some of

them. For some of us, it's our mother who teaches us to do no harm. A 12-year-old little girl names Lerika lives in Bailey, Colorado, wrote this about her mom. "My Mom has breast cancer, she's a survivor. She pushes her way through hard times. She puts everyone else first. My Mom is my hero, for she's still here today, trying to keep up with me and pushing harder and harder. She heals me when I'm ill. She rocks me when I'm sad. She teaches me things I need to know, in case she has to go. She has this fear that she might have to leave soon, before she teaches me all that I should know. I love my mother, but I still fear that the cancer will come back. My mom is remarkable and super and miraculous. I love her. She has taught me so much."

For many of us here today, it's our mother who taught us to do no harm. I know that's true for me. I can hear her voice, even today, telling me to do no harm. That road back you were singing about, that's my mother. She died just the year before we came here, so she never got to meet you people, and I'm sad for that. She would have enjoyed this church very much. Kathy, my wife, came to visit me in Fort Worth, Texas. She then spent some time with a cousin who lives in Texas, but we got to spend one night on the town in Fort Worth. In the old part of town, by the stockyard, if you've ever been there, it's a really beautiful place, we were walking through the streets there. Nothing much open except restaurants, and this guy comes up to me and says, "Mister, I don't know what your line is, but I just want you to know you're walking with the prettiest girl in Texas." And after he got a few steps beyond us, I turned to Kathy and said, "I think that man's drunk. And that's when I heard the voice of my mother, who said, "I thought you were smarter than that."

Bill Cannon was a bishop of the church. He died a few years ago. Bill Cannon was a professor at Candler School of Theology, and he was a dean of Emory at one time, a fantastic scholar, part of the Confessing Movement actually, the more conservative wing of the church. He wrote a book about his life, it was called *The Magnificent Obsession*, and he told about something that had happened when he was young, something his mother told him. "As a graduation present from college, from Yale, my parents gave me a trip to Cuba, but my mother decided to go along with me. There happened to be on the ship a classmate of mine from the University. I knew him only by sight and name, for we had no contact with each other on campus. He was known to be homosexual, and as such was ostracized by the rest of us, who did not want to be identified as gay ourselves. This boy came up and spoke to me on board ship, and I just turned aside and walked away. Mother observed what had happened, and she asked the reason for my rudeness. And when I told her, she said, "Son, I thought you planned to become a Christian minister. If your behavior today is indicative of what your ministry will be, I would not want you as my pastor. You are more interested in what other people think of you than you care about people like that. You have no place in ministry. This morning, you showed that you thought more about your reputation than that classmate's welfare. Son, I'm ashamed of you."

Someday the church, I hope, will learn what almost every mother tries to teach. Do no harm. Look at the consequence of what we say and what we do. See the pain in the eyes

of those we hurt, and begin to get it together and realize our mission in life is not to judge others. Do no harm, and when we see we are doing it, stop doing it.

The second simple rule, to help us get it together, is: Do good. Do good. One of the places we come to be reminded of that is the church. The church is established as a place where we are reminded of the good that we do. Laura Huxley in her book, *You Are Not the Target*, has some good advice. She writes, "At one time or another, the more fortunate among us make three startling discoveries. Discovery number one: each one of us has, in varying degree, the power to make others feel better or worse. Discovery number two: making others feel better is more rewarding than making them feel worse. Discovery number three: making others feel better, generally, makes us feel better." That's so true, and we do have a choice. And the church reminds us to do good, every chance we have, every place we are.

James Moore tells a story about a barber who didn't understand that. He was always whining and complaining, always negative. One day a man came into his barber shop for a haircut, sat down in a chair, talked about the trip he was going to take. He would leave tomorrow, the next day. "First, we're going to London." The barber interrupted – "London, that's a terrible place. It's dirty and noisy and too expensive." "Well, then we're going to go to Paris." The barber interrupted again – "That's even worse. People are rude. They don't like Americans there. You're going to hate Paris." Next he said, "Well, we're going to go to Rome." The barber came in front of the chair and looked at him and said, "Rome! Rome's the worst of all. The food is terrible. Don't even think about going to the Vatican, the lines are long, you're not going to get to see the Pope. The Pope's inaccessible, and anyway, if you see him, he doesn't speak really good English."

Four weeks later the traveler returned to the barber shop, and the barber asked him, "How was your trip?" And the traveler said, "London was great. The prices were reasonable. Paris was beautiful. They love Americans there. And Rome was the best. We went to the Vatican, and we had an audience with the Pope. There were no crowds. He had me kneel, and he placed his hand on my head, and he gave me a blessing. And he leaned toward me and spoke in perfect English, and he said, "You've a very nice man, but I have to tell you, that is the worst haircut I've ever seen."

Do good. Be positive. Lift others up. The church is a place where we get it together, and together we do good. The church is a place where our diversity is appreciated, for we do good. We do good, each in our own way. The most exciting thing about the church is the good we do, as we work together. I guess it started with Rick Riley. He saw a need in Africa for soccer nets and soccer balls, and so he sent some over. Ted Turner got into it, but it wasn't good enough, because there were children dying of malaria. So they sent bed nets to put over children so that mosquitoes wouldn't bit them. The United Methodist Church got involved. Bed nets can save children's lives, so we got into it. Two weeks ago, a bishop in the church talked about the Nothing But Nets program, and when he finished, he was holding a basketball, and he put the basketball on the altar and walked away and he said, "The basketball there is for sale." Very quickly, the people from Kansas jumped out of their seats, and they said, "We will give a thousand dollars in

honor of the NCAA Men's Basketball Champion." Very quickly the people from Tennessee jumped up, and they didn't speak of Memphis, but they said, "We will give two thousand dollars in honor of the Lady ---- who won the Women's National Championship." And then the people from North Carolina got up, and they said, "We will give five thousand dollars in honor of the University of North Carolina Tarheels, who would have won, had they been there." Which I know was wrong. And we got into it, and after it was all over, the people from Ohio bid \$80,000. All of us together, when we collected all of our bids, almost half a million dollars. I came back with nothing. Bill Gates Senior doubled it, and added five million. The church reminds us to do good.

Here at this church, we got this crazy bald guy who's going to get into a canoe and paddle it, and buy farm animals for people somewhere. Last Sunday I'm taking the people who want to join the church, or at least talk about it, around the building, and I run into this classroom, this conference room that's full of people. I said, "What are you folks doing here?" They said, "Well, we're meeting, we're going to Guatemala in October. A week from tomorrow, the Lilly Foundation's going to give JoAn Hopkins a national award in recognition of her work with people with depression. She's done lots of good. Donna Miller is a member of our church, and she didn't go to the baseball game. We sent a bus to a baseball game this past Thursday. The Rockies won. We'll have to go back – I think we're their lucky charm. Fifty people on a bus, but Donna didn't get to go because she's sick. She got pneumonia. Know where she got it? She got it doing hurricane relief in Mississippi. And the young people of our church, they're going to go to Chicago. They're not going to visit the museums, they're going to go to the inner city. They're going to do some good. We get it together when we do no harm. Our mamas taught us that. And when we do good, I like to think the church reminds us of that.

The third thing: We keep it together. The third simple rule, when we stay in love with God. Arguments about the existence of God are not so compelling to me. There's the story of the scientist who prayed, "Oh God, we don't need you any more. Science has finally figured out how to create life in your image. We can do that now, just like you did at the beginning of time." And God was heard to say, "Is that so? Tell me about it." And the scientist answered, "Well, we can take dirt and we can form it into your likeness, we can breathe life into it, thus creating a person. Let me show you." And the scientist bent down and gathered a handful of dirt and started to mold it into the shape of a human being, and the voice of God was heard to say, "Get your own dirt." Interesting story, I don't find that compelling. Timothy Keller has written a book entitled *The Reason for God*. He says he believes that everything in the world is contingent, and has a cause outside itself, and is dependent on something else, and he thinks God is the one non-contingent being that exists apart from everything else. Interesting, but that doesn't do it for me.

Leonard Bernstein gets a bit closer, the great conductor. He said that he finds the music of Beethoven, the idea of the rightness, that when Beethoven put a note together, you must know that the next note would be the only note that would be right. Now, what compelled Beethoven to write that? Bernstein said, that's God in the melody, in the music. British physicist John Polkinghorne said he thought our belief in God is our

broadest possible way of coordinating our knowledge of the many otherwise disjointed facts, that belief in God helps us come to terms with the world. Getting it together means staying in love with God, that's the compelling thing for me that proves that there is a God. And that means when our support breaks down, when our health falls apart, when our options narrow, when our luck runs out, when our troubles outcount our ability to face them, when our answers are mocked by our questions, when our solutions seem inept in facing our problems, to stay in love with God means we come to the darkness and we know that there is a step beyond the darkness we can take, and we trust that we can take it. To stay in love with God means that we come to a point of scarcity and somehow we see abundance. To stay in love with God is to wake up every day after the worst days of our lives and believe that this next day is going to be a good day. It might even be a better day, and perhaps it will be the best day. To stay in love with God is to get it together, to find integrity in the midst of disintegration, to find trust in the midst of betrayal, to find the gift of forgiveness at a time when we might otherwise give in to bitterness.

People who learn to live their lives staying in love with God is the greatest proof of God for me. That there is something beyond our deepest fear and we can face it. That there is a presence in the passing flux of time and we can live our days, good and bad, in trust, in joy and expectation, and in adventure. To stay in love with God, simple rule number three. Three simple rules, so simple to say and so hard to live, and for some of us it was our mother who taught us to do no harm, and for some of us, it's the church that reminds us to do good, and behind it all, for all of us, I think, whether we know it or not, there is an unknown power, an unseen presence, a soft-spoken call forward. It's on the mountaintop when the snow is like silk. It's in the valley of the shadow, when the dark is so deep. It's at the source of all that is, that comes to us as love. And there is an invitation as we come and go, as we live and die, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in all the seasons of life, to do no harm, to try to do good, and to stay in love with God.

I wonder sometimes in my own life, and people I know, if we'll ever get it together. But you know? Those disciples did, long ago, far away. They did. They got it together at Pentecost. Well heck, if they can do it, maybe so can we.